



Newsletter

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

The future for RSG

For some time it has been obvious that the fundraising climate has changed radically in the last year or two and RSG is likely to have to reduce its costs. This has naturally dominated discussions about RSG's future even while our services continue to develop in a number of areas.

Future scenarios

One of the first decisions we needed to make was whether to go on spending as usual until funds ran out or to downsize our operation so that we could go on longer: giving us the chance that at some stage the funding climate will improve again and we can protect our services. At their meeting on 15th December the trustees opted for the latter strategy. Annette and Emma have volunteered to reduce their hours in order to provide at least part of the savings required.

Our services have of course been getting more complex in recent years as the service user population becomes more diverse and problems other than those of securing asylum claims, or surviving while the claims are being pursued, come into greater prominence. RSG is still the major provider of support to asylum seekers outside Plymouth, but it is possible that other agencies might take up some of the strain in other areas.

Collaboration

RSG has always worked with a large number of other agencies in that we cross-refer, and also of course in putting on Refugee Week. In recent years funders, and the

Government, have put on pressure for small charities to collaborate in closer ways. This is mainly because local and central government hope to delegate many functions to the voluntary sector [basically charities and church organisations as contrasted with the public and private sectors], and find it difficult to deal with large numbers of small organisations. But it can be argued that closer collaboration also delivers other possible benefits. These include more effective provision of services when agencies do not compete or can manage overlaps more efficiently; joint fundraising bids (especially to central and local government); joint use of resources (such as premises and back-office functions); sharing expertise (e.g. by one agency providing advice in another's premises) and helping to train each other's staff and volunteers.

In view of this we invited the Devon voluntary agencies whose aims were closest to ours to participate in a morning conference on 8th December, where delegates discussed the advantages and disadvantages of closer collaboration. This threw up a

number of ideas which we hope to follow up. We are also hoping to acquire more skills in this area by getting professional advice.

How you can help

Obviously, at the moment the main need is for a more secure source of income. It has long been recognised that we needed to draw on the support of the local community more than we have done: such income is not subject to the decisions of large national charitable funds, which, grateful as we are for their help over the years, must inevitably respond to other priorities and cannot be expected to go on funding us for ever. If you feel you would like to help us please refer to the next page for suggestions.

Do you want to improve your written and spoken English?

Do you want to feel more confident speaking English in a variety of different situations?

If so, come along to the Refugee Support Group for **FREE English lessons**.

EVERY TUESDAY and THURSDAY between 5-7pm at the RSG office!!

Our dedicated team of volunteers will work with you to improve your English and to address any specific issues you wish, such as application forms, CVs, letter writing... Just let us know what you would like help with!

Also in this issue

Please help; priorities; appreciations and trustee report (next page)

Political news and Christmas Island disaster (page 3)

Child detention (page 4)

REFUGEE SUPPORT
GROUP DEVON

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

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Market Street. Access by
stairs only: please tele-
phone if you need help.)

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EDITORS

Annette Hughes and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG trustees

The next meeting will
be on Wednesday 12th
January, in the RSG
offices (see above),
5.30 p.m. For informa-
tion contact the office.

Every ordinary meet-
ing starts by consider-
ing any proposals or
requests put forward
by asylum seekers,
who are particularly
welcome. Agenda
items to the office if
possible two weeks
before the meeting.

*NB views expressed in
this newsletter are not
necessarily those of the
Refugee Support
Group Devon*

Trustee report

Trustees met on 13th Octo-
ber, 10th November and
15th December. We held an
'awayday' on 8th Decem-
ber. Most of the matters
under discussion are dealt
with elsewhere in this issue.

Premises

Trustees negotiated a re-
decoration of the stairwell
with the landlord. This is
now complete.

Please help

So how can local peo-
ple help?

It goes without saying that
the best form of income is
a regular subscription. If
you are already a member,
consider doing this by
standing order (gift-aided
if possible). You can use
the leaflet enclosed. If you
would prefer a one-off
donation the form allows
for this too. Maybe if RSG
helped you in the past you
can now help us in return?

Please also suggest to any-

one you know who is
concerned about asylum
seekers and refugees in
Devon that they do the
same. More leaflets easily
available from the office
(see left)!

There are of course many
other ways of raising
money and we do need
people with ideas and the
willingness to help. If you
are experienced in fund-
raising and feel you can
contribute your skills, get
in touch. You'll be
warmly welcomed!

Priorities for RSG provision

Also on our 'awayday' we
asked our own service users,
workers and volunteers what
they felt were the priorities
for our services. Some of the
most important identified
were:

the drop-in service and work
with asylum seekers;

the premises, which are a
haven in themselves;

the women's outreach serv-
ice;

education services like Eng-
lish, and help with job-
seeking;

raising awareness of asylum
issues;

the allotment.

Ideas on how to achieve this

with reduced funding in-
cluded:

streamline the drop-in serv-
ice;

maybe eventually downsize
our premises or share with
other groups;

fund the women's outreach
service separately;

train volunteers to do more
and increase the levels of
responsibility they can ac-
cept;

cut staffing, either to one
post or a job share.

We might also try to raise
money by merchandising,
selling training or consul-
tancy and getting help from
local businesses.

An IT course was put on
which was well received
and may be repeated. Gold
Dozi stalls were booked
for the period running up
to Christmas.

More trustees

It is agreed that RSG
needs more trustees and
discussions will be held
aiming at deciding which
roles are most needed and
what procedures will be
followed in recruitment
and induction.

Appreciation: by a
service user

I am Mujibalam Khalil from Afghani-
stan. I worked as a medical doctor in
Afghanistan for 13 years. I did my spe-
cialization in public health. Due to
some problems I left Afghanistan on 18
June 2010, and wanted to go to a safe
country. In the end I reached the UK on
9 August 2010.

When I got to the UK, I went to the UK
Border Agency in Croydon. After my
screening interview they sent me to
Glasgow for further interview and other
things that were needed. The Home
Office provided me accommodation
and supported me financially. My sec-
ond interview was on 17 August 2010.
I got a positive response as a refugee
for 5 years in the UK on 25 August
2010. After that I was in Glasgow until
21 September 2010 and then I decided
to go to Exeter.

After one night in Exeter I went to the
Refugee Support Group office and they
guided me and started my support.

Their support was not only financial, it
was also to help me enrol my children
at schools, register with the GP and
dentist, and send us for English lan-
guage classes at Exeter College. My
wife and I have started our English
language training at the college. RSG
has provided financial support for us to
take the IELTS course, which we need
to continue our professions here. Also
the RSG is always trying to find oppor-
tunities for us to learn, find jobs, fill in
forms etc.

- and by a volunteer

I have really enjoyed volunteering with
RSG in the drop-in service. It is re-
warding, but also challenging. The
wide range of queries and different
people I have met has been really bene-
ficial to the development of my com-
munication skills. It has also improved
my ability to think on my feet about
how best to help those who come in.
What I like most about RSG is the
community atmosphere; Annette and
Emma, the other volunteers and the
refugees and asylum seekers that use
the services are all friendly and kind
hearted. Everyone who comes in is
grateful for the help you can give them.
When you assist someone in filling in a
form or writing a letter, it is great feel-
ing when the next week they pop in and
tell you that it worked, or that some-
thing went well. Sometimes, you wish
you could do more for them, but just
doing something to help or signposting
them to different services is the best
thing you can do.

Natasha Bellinger

News roundup

'Failed' asylum seekers and work

On 19th August the UK Borders Agency [UKBA] said that it would implement the Supreme Court judgement in July that failed asylum seekers whose 'further submissions' have not been dealt with can apply for employment after 12 months. UKBA said the decision would only have a short-term effect because such cases were expected to be cleared up by next year.

New checking service for settlement applicants in parts of UK

UKBA has launched a new checking service for settlement applications in some areas. If a migrant is applying for settlement (also known as 'indefinite leave to remain') using application form SET(M), they can now have their application checked by a local authority officer before it is sent in.

It says: 'Although the service will not offer immigration advice, it will benefit applicants by checking and returning their valuable documents. It will also reassure them that their application is complete and valid when it is sent to us, avoiding any unnecessary delay.'

The service is being piloted in the London areas of Brent and Barnet, and will be followed over the next two months by 10 local authorities in Cambridgeshire, Cardiff, Dudley, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxfordshire, South Lanarkshire and Stockport.

Immigration raids in Southwest

There have been UK Border Agency raids on businesses in Redruth and Falmouth in Cornwall, Dorchester and Portland in Dorset, Bridgwater in Somerset in September and early October. The Agency also says it detained five Eritreans on a truck bound for Newton Abbot.

Refugee Council comments on Dover Immigration Removal Centre report

The Refugee Council commented on a report produced on Dover Immigration Removal Centre by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, which it says provides 'further evidence that asylum seekers in detention are being denied access to justice'. Some people in Dover IRC have been in detention for over four years 'with no prospect of being removed because of poor management of their cases'. The Refugee Council urges that detention should only be used as a last resort.

Local campaigners have made claims that despite rules that people with serious illnesses should not be detained, many of the detainees had severe medical conditions. Access to health care in the centre was also difficult: 'The Home Office is saying one thing but not doing it'. A worker with Kent

Refugee Help said of one detainee: 'He had some psychiatric problems, but was not allowed his medication. The most they would give him was an aspirin. I was extremely worried about him. I would call him sometimes twice a day. He then admitted that he had been tempted to take his own life. I think this could become more common, with detainees becoming suicidal'.

Deportations to Zimbabwe and Iraq

On 14th October UKBA announced that it would resume enforced returns of failed asylum seekers to Zimbabwe. The Foreign Office has also announced that deportations to Iraq will continue in spite of protests from the EU Court of Human Rights and the UN High Commission for Refugees. The Court has said that if people threatened with deportation to Iraq appeal to it they will automatically be allowed to remain at least temporarily in the UK.

UKBA announces evictions

On November 5th UKBA sent letters of eviction to 600 families living in Glasgow City Council accommodation, following a dispute about costs. The effect will be to force them to relocate to private landlords contracted to UKBA. Protesters claim that the current accommodation is likely to be empty if refugees are moved out and the evictions will dislocate relationships developed with the local community. UKBA has also admitted that its 'normal practice' is to give families 24 hours' notice to move out of accommodation. Glasgow MP Anas Sarwar is fighting the case.

Health Secretary announces new initiative to help the vulnerable

On 30th November Andrew Lansley announced the formation of a new body dedicated to helping with chronic health problems among marginalised groups. This is aimed at reducing health inequalities and would include asylum seekers. It will be financed by a 'ring-fenced public health budget, weighted towards deprived areas'. The announcement was welcomed by St Mungo's, the homelessness charity.

Immigration cap judgement

The Government's cap on immigration from outside the EU, which has been intensely controversial, seems likely to go ahead in spite of pressure from business and the care system and, indeed, many of the Government's natural supporters. However a temporary ban, introduced to prevent a surge in immigration before the permanent cap, was declared illegal by the High Court. The Government has refused to remove the cap, saying that it will resume next week after 'technical' legal problems were overcome.

People-trafficker jailed

Ferzad Pezeshk, an Iranian-born former asylum seeker, was this month sentenced to five years in prison for helping more than

100 asylum seekers reach the UK between 2006 and 2008. He charged between £5000 and £12000 to clients, most of whom came from Iran and Afghanistan.

Spouses ban ruled unlawful

In yet another legal rebuff the Home Office was told by the Court of Appeal that the ban on under-21s from outside Europe joining their spouses in the UK was 'arbitrary and disruptive' in its impact on 'innocent young people'. 'Like some 5000 others, they were the innocent victims of a blanket policy designed to target a few cases of forced marriage.' Two couples, Diego and Amber Aguilar and Shakira Bibi and Suhyal Mohammed, had appealed. The Home Office says it will appeal to the Supreme Court. If the ruling is upheld, the ban will have to be either rewritten or abandoned. In the mean time, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants says more couples may appeal.

Christmas Island disaster



On 15th December a wooden fishing boat carrying up to 100 Iranian and Iraqi asylum seekers from Indonesia was shipwrecked on the rocks of Christmas Island. Around 48 people, including four infants, are believed to have died in the surf.

Two days later detainees on the island, which is used to process asylum seekers, staged a demonstration, holding up signs asking for international aid and reading 'Help, where is the UN?'.

Australia's harsh policies on asylum seekers (less than 2% of its immigrants) have been widely criticised. There seems to be a race to the bottom between Australia's two main political parties as to who will be most tough on refugees. The current Labour government has a wafer-thin majority and the opposition is blaming its policies for the disaster.

'Australia must take a more humanitarian and ethical approach to asylum seekers. These are after all among the most disadvantaged people on the planet,' said independent MP Andrew Wilkie.

Still more recently yet another similar boat, carrying 68 passengers suspected of being asylum seekers, was intercepted by the Australian navy north of the island. Ministers said they would be taken to the island for 'security, identity and health checks'.

One more pledge might do it ...

The Government's promise to end child detention has now slipped four times. The latest pledge is that it will end by May next year. That will be a full year since the election. What is holding things up, and can we have any confidence in this new deadline?

In the current political context it is fairly obvious that Nick Clegg was allowed to make his latest announcement as part of a 'save Nick' strategy by the Conservatives: a rather disheartening indication of what priority ending child detention has. Since the Coalition took power last May ministers have repeatedly promised early implementation, but so far, although there are currently no children in detention, the system is still in place. In Australia, where the same process happened, child detention was eventually resumed.

It seems likely that UKBA are fighting a fierce rearguard action. They report that they are running 'pilot schemes' to replace detention, but very little detail is available about them.

A leaked local authority memo (see panel) about a pilot scheme in the NW explains that under the scheme a family would be given two weeks to leave the country. After that forced deportation would be arranged within a further two weeks. At that point (June 2010) it was not clear whether the family would be told the date and time.

Submissions to the Home Office by children's charities have described previous pilots which failed, and ascribe failure mainly to insufficient recognition by UKBA of the needs of the families concerned. In other countries a high percentage of families who lose the right to remain return to their home countries voluntarily: 69% in New York, 82% in Sweden, 67% in Australia, for example. In the UK the figure for 2009 was 14%. Bail for Immigration Detainees and the Children's Society argue that the UK system does not deal with families in a way which inspires trust. Their detailed criticism fills many pages, but reading between the lines it seems as though, once again, we are seeing a dysfunctional culture in UKBA. Families are treated as though they will abscond even when no proper assessment

has been made. Requests by families for special treatment on health grounds (and we are talking about refugees, here, whose experiences may have been extremely traumatic) are routinely dismissed without explanation. Children are separated from parents in immigration detention (to a much greater extent than would be the case if they were in jail). Families are not told what is going to happen to them, and proper legal representation is often not available. Deadlines are too tight. The default position seems to be detention as many families are detained only subsequently to be given permission to remain. The brutality of the system has also been widely detailed.

Part of the recommended remedy is to set up a case management system which, by contrast, tries to engage the family's confidence, keep them informed and ensure that they have professional support. These are the methods which work in other countries. There are a number of reasons for doubting whether these changes will actually happen (as opposed to changes which merely rebrand the current methods). One is that the methods recommended would probably require the complete reinvention of UKBA (a 'new spirit' which Nick Clegg seems to think has already happened), whose culture is probably past repair. The other is that most of the difficulties with families arise from their fear of what will happen to them when they go home. This takes us back to the long-term allegation that our system turns down far too many well-founded asylum claims. It also seems to be based on what has repeatedly been described as a 'culture of disbelief', which assumes the worst of asylum seekers and consequently behaves towards them in ways calculated to cause fear and distrust.

Above all, of course, the system is the creation of politicians. Public opinion has been formed by years of Labour - and now Coalition - politicians promising to resist abuses of the asylum system, which (together with poisonous immigration politics) has made for a situation in which the

We will end the detention of children for immigration purposes.

[Coalition Agreement, May 2010, paragraph 17]

After the Labour Government failed to act for so many years, we will end the incarceration of children for immigration purposes once and for all.

[David Cameron, May 2010]



It is simply a moral outrage that last year the Labour government imprisoned behind bars 1,000 children who were innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever.

I can confirm that the government will come forward

shortly with an announcement about how we will deliver on our pledge to end child detention and to close the Yarl's Wood detention centre for good.

[Nick Clegg (Deputy Prime Minister, pictured) speaking in July 2010]

We're putting new arrangements in place as quickly as we can, and the new spirit is already governing the way the authorities operate. And on that, I hope the fact that there will be no children in detention this Christmas speaks for itself.

Today's announcement puts our values, the protection of children, above paranoia over the protection of our borders. That puts the right thing over looking and sounding tough.

[Speaking in December 2010]

public believe that abuses are rife, and consequently officials are under heavy pressure to disbelieve asylum claims. Nick Clegg has rightly referred to the need to 'put the right thing over looking and sounding tough'. It is greatly to be hoped that he delivers what he again promises. But turning round the super-tanker of asylum policy and politics may be simply more than he can or will do. It will be essential for campaigners to keep up the pressure and also to scrutinise whatever solutions UKBA propose with a very sceptical eye. [JC]

The authorities are clearly very worried by the prospect of local campaigns protesting against deportations. Therefore it's a good thing to get involved: it seems that local opinion is often much less hostile to asylum seekers than national opinion (driven by the tabloids) is. The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns [NCADC] is on ncadc.org.uk. Medical Justice is medicaljustice.org.uk. Another major player is Bail for Immigration Detainees (biduk.org). The leaked memo is in the *Guardian* website for 11th August 2010.